

# How demand for delicacy drives silent massacre of Kenya's sharks



Photo/SAMANTHA SPOONER/NATION Shark fins at a fish market in Mombasa on February 22, 2012.

## IN SUMMARY

- While the Fisheries ministry claims lack of capacity to intervene, the shark population off the Kenyan coast has been decimated due to demand for its fin in China and other Asian countries.
- Trade and consumption of shark fin has been banned in some countries but this has not stopped the wanton slaughter of the mammoth fish

The shark population is fast dwindling off the Kenyan coast under a sustained assault by traders targeting them for their fins.

The trade in shark fin, which is not illegal in Kenya, earns traders at least Sh554 million (\$6.6 million) annually in exports to Hong Kong.

In 2008, Kenya exported 10.984 tonnes of shark fin to Hong Kong, according to the advocacy group Oceana.

The fin is the product of "shark finning", a practice considered to be extremely cruel to animals, and one of the most destructive to shark populations the world over.

Shark fin costs approximately \$600 (Sh50,000) per kilo in Hong Kong. Shark fin soup is considered a delicacy in Asia, particularly China.

It is not uncommon to find shark fin soup in Chinese restaurants in Kenya as well.

The value of shark fin is very high even on the Kenyan market. In Mombasa, fishermen sell one kilo of shark fin for approximately \$200 to \$250 (Sh16,800 to Sh21,000), although this depends on the quality and size of the fin.

With these high prices, oceanic sharks historically caught as "by-catch" (not the intended target species by fishing vessels) are now being targeted for their fins.

Population figures for sharks in the Indian Ocean were not readily available from the Ministry of Fisheries or the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI).

However, in their research, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) has demonstrated that the numbers of certain shark species in the Indian Ocean are extremely low.

## Shark fin trade

The Blue Shark, for example, is labelled "near threatened". A source in the deep-sea diving industry also said that "the waters here have been so hopelessly overfished that everything seems to have been killed off."

This sentiment was echoed by Abdul Ahman, a key figure in Kenya's fishing industry for the last 40 years, who stated that "it will take 20 years to get the shark again" because of the damage to their populations.

The trade in shark fins from the Kenyan coast can be traced back to the 1990s. It evidently became a very large business.

Companies such as Wananchi Marine Products Ltd, based in Mombasa, would export the fins which they acquired locally or dried from Somalia.

According to John Karanja, a former chief engineer on board one of Wananchi Marine's trawlers in the early 1990s, a former director of intelligence was a partner in Wananchi Marine during the time when they dealt in shark fins.

Today, Wananchi Marine have stated that they no longer trade in shark fins as they focus on tuna and have signed the Earth Island Institute agreement which does not allow them to trade in shark fins.

One of the company's suppliers of shark fin was Volker Bassen. He traded in shark fins with Wananchi Marine for roughly one year in the early 1990s.

Using information provided by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), Volker described how he acquired the necessary fishing lines and built six of his own fiberglass boats which would go out every day.

Each of these boats would have a total of 400 hooks on their lines, catching approximately 150 to 250 sharks every day.

Volker stopped his participation in this trade when he observed a dramatic reduction in shark numbers and became increasingly aware of the detrimental effects on the environment that the trade was having.

Volker now runs the East African Whale Shark Trust, dedicated to the protection of this large fish.

These artisanal shark fishing methods, as employed by Volker, do not catch sharks with the sole intention of using their fins and discarding the rest.

In Kenya, the shark is a valued source of meat consumed locally. Artisanal fishermen tend to be poor paid hands who are purely trying to make a living for their family.

However, these fishing methods could not have accounted for the 10.984 tonnes of shark fin that left Kenya in 2008.

The trade between Kenya and Somalia involves dry shark fins being brought into the country before being exported to the Middle East, and Asia, but there is also evidence that shark finning was occurring in Kenya's deep seas.

Several sources, from fishmongers to high scale traders involved in Kenya's fishing industry, stated that legal and illegal fishing was known to occur in Kenyan waters with the use of long-liners and trawlers — renowned for catching high quantities of shark as by-catch.

In an interview with a fisheries official in Nairobi, it was acknowledged that in 2008, a ship called Sakoba, a Spanish vessel which flies the Kenyan flag, used to catch sharks "whether it was by by-catch or targeted, the line (was) a bit blurred".

The vessel was licensed to catch swordfish. However, it is difficult to verify that vessels in the deep seas are restricting their catch to swordfish alone.

It should be noted that according to the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, swordfish have a similar distribution to blue sharks, and this could account for the high numbers of sharks caught.

### **Illegal fishing**

According to the fisheries official, the Ministry of Fisheries "does not have the capacity to police the sea." This allows for several situations in which finning can occur.

The official described how "many vessels (will) use ports in Seychelles or Mauritius," they will come into Kenya's deep waters with a fishing licence and declare what they catch before going back to those ports.

A worker at the docks in Mombasa confirmed that this occurs, stating that a seaman was arrested in the Seychelles with just shark fins on-board, having fished in Kenyan waters.

It is more profitable to fill a vessel with shark fins than shark meat. The sharks are hauled onto fishing vessels, their fins are sliced off and the dead animal is thrown back into the sea.

In a 2010 report on the status of various sharks, the IOTC stated that "many catch records probably under-represent the actual catches of sharks because they do not account for discards i.e. do not record catches of sharks for which only the fins are kept".

The fisheries official in Nairobi said, "the truth is (the Ministry of Fisheries) has no way of verifying what (the vessels have) caught."

Policing the waters is also made difficult in situations where big vessels "transfer their catch to a transport vessel which takes it to the market, this means the vessel does not have to go to port" and discrepancies occur.

### **Lack of capacity**

The area which the Ministry of Fisheries is expected to monitor stretches along the Kenyan coastline and 200 nautical miles out from the shore, a considerable area.

However, there appears to be a lack of cohesive strategy when dealing with this issue in the ministry itself.

Though the official confirmed that shark fin trade does occur, the provincial director for fisheries in Mombasa, Nicholas Ntheketha, said "there isn't any shark finning at the coast."

He did, however, say that certain aspects of by-catch is "illegal, unregulated and unreported" and "shark finning (could) fall under this." Evidence of a local shark fin trade was found in Mombasa.

However, it was not on the scale it used to be because of international pressure and, more notably, Somali pirates.

Though the trade in shark fins is legal in Kenya, there are international treaties and organisations in place to which Kenya is either a signatory or a member that ban the trade.

The IOTC tries to ensure that the fishing of tuna does not have an adverse effect on other marine life and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an international agreement between governments to ensure international trade does not threaten the survival of wild animals and plants.

CITES memorandum of understanding applies to species listed in the convention of migratory species appendices, which includes several shark species.

The issue with international agreements is that this has not been domesticated into Kenyan legislation, and local monitoring systems are lacking.

The hope for the future of Kenyan sharks lies predominantly with Somali pirates.

In their research, the IOTC has demonstrated that the numbers of certain shark species in the Indian Ocean are extremely low, such as the blue shark, which is an endangered species.

However, the commission also recognised that the presence of Somali pirates in the area has been beneficial to shark stocks.

In late 2008, there was a noticeable increase in the activities of Somali pirates who operate a financially lucrative ship-hijacking operation off the coast of East Africa.

Merchant ships and fishing vessels, including the aforementioned Saboka, were held for ransom.

This resulted in a reduction in deep-sea fishing activities off the Kenyan coast. In 2007, the Ministry of Fisheries issued licences for 49 vessels, whereas in 2009, 21 licences were issued.

Of these licences issued, not a single one belongs to a Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean or Chinese vessel. The majority of ships fishing in Kenyan waters today belong to Spain and France.

It should be noted that in 2008, the largest documented exports of shark fin to Hong Kong came from Spain (2,646.442 tonnes).

Furthermore, due to piracy prevalence, no long-liner vessels, notorious for their huge by-catches of sharks, were licensed.

Instead all the vessels who fish in Kenyan waters use a method known as "purse seine," meaning they use fishing nets that hang vertically in the water and scoops fish out of the water who aggregate near the surface.

The conservation of Kenya's sharks has not been a priority, yet the removal of this "apex", or top predator, could have dire effects on the marine ecosystem on which the country relies for both tourism and fishing revenue.

There is a serious lack of monitoring by the ministry, which places the main deterrent of shark finning in the hands of Somali pirates.

If the war in Somali ends and pirate attacks off the East Coast of Africa reduce, the effects on the Kenyan coast could ironically be devastating.

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